

ARIZONA VETERANS' SERVICE ADVISORY COMMISSION
American Legion Post 81, 181 Paseo Del Sol Ave, Lake Havasu AZ 86403
Saturday - November 3, 2007

M I N U T E S

Call to Order - The meeting was called to order at 10:00 a.m. by Chairman Dingwall.

Present

Advisory Commissioners

Tom Dingwall, Chairman
Kenneth Yamanouchi, Vice Chairman
Gary Fredericks
Phillip Quochytewa
Larry McKim
Linda Fulkerson
Bill Lunsford

Arizona Department of Veterans' Services

Lee Borgen, Vets' Benefit Counselor

Absent

Webb Ellis
Tom Heaney

Opening – Chairman Dingwall welcomed everyone. He introduced the dignitaries present and offered them the opportunity to make brief comments. Dignitaries included: Mark Nexsen, Mayor of Lake Havasu, Trish Groe, AZ State Representative, Eldred Enas, Vice Chairman, Colorado River Indian Tribes and William Thornton, Chairman Southwest Arizona Stand Down Committee.

Chairman Dingwall provided a brief bio and a brief overview of the Advisory Commission makeup and purpose. He invited each of the Commissioners to introduce themselves. Each Commissioner provided a brief bio.

Minutes - Vice Chairman Yamanouchi moved approval of the October 11, 2007 minutes subject to minor corrections. Commissioner Fulkerson seconded the motion; unanimously approved.

Chairman Dingwall outlined Director Maxon's five imperatives:

1. Establish and maintain operational and fiscal stability for the State Veteran Home.
 - It is operating well, but finances are a concern.
 - Accounts Receivables are more than \$2 million, about \$1.2 million of which is owed by Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS). They have been sent a letter requesting timely payment.
2. Grow the client base of the Fiduciary section
 - Fiduciary currently serves about 300 clients. We would like to see the client load at around 450.
3. Hire, train and place the newly authorized Veterans' Benefits Counselors
 - VBC's are being hired in increments of three or four at a time.
4. Develop and implement an aggressive Veterans/ Business program
 - There are numerous federal programs to help disabled-veteran-owned (DVOB) businesses and a percentage of DVOB businesses are targeted to supply goods and services to federal agencies nationwide.
 - Most of these business owners do not identify themselves as "disabled vets" which makes it difficult to locate them. They are not aware that they may be entitled to VA disability benefits or aware of other federal programs designed specifically for them.

- New Mexico holds seminars on how to do business with the Federal Government and provides benefits counselors on site to file claims to get people into the disability system.
5. Aggressively pursue certification of government and private training programs for GI Bill approval.
- Arizona Dept. of Veterans' Services (ADVS) is the certifying agency for education and training in Arizona. The State Approving Agency (SAA) determines if a program is eligible for GI Bill participation.
 - Only about half of eligible veterans use their GI Bill benefits.

Chairman Dingwall noted that the counselor in Kingman quit and efforts are underway to replace him.

Chairman Dingwall advised the Commission is a State Commission that advises the Governor on State issues. The Commission does not have the authority to deal with Federal issues, although the Commissioners will carry questions on Federal matters back to Phoenix and pass them on to the appropriate agency. He further advised that the state is divided into four regions and that Mohave county belongs to Commissioner Linda Fulkerson and Commissioner Bill Lunsford. He invited the audience to submit their questions on the comment cards provided on each table. Having questions and comments in writing makes it easier to follow up later when necessary. He turned the meeting over to Commissioner Fulkerson and Commissioner Lunsford.

Question: When will a State benefits counselor be assigned in Bullhead?

Response: Commissioner Fulkerson deferred the response to Lee Borgen. Lee Borgen advised that a female counselor has been hired for Bullhead and she is currently in training in Yuma. An exact time table for placement has not been established, but hope to fill the position in late December or sometime in January.

Question: Who is the person assigned to Bullhead, what is her name?

Response: Lee Borgen advised that she has met the woman and was very favorably impressed. She apologized that she could not remember the woman's name.

Question: Mr. Thornton asked about the Commission's attitude towards stand downs.

Response: Commissioner Fulkerson advised that the Commission does not get actively involved in stand downs. The Commissioner assigned to the area wanting to conduct a stand down acts as an advisor to the local stand down committee. Since the very successful stand down events in Yuma, the Commission now has a very good notebook on how to plan and accomplish a successful stand down. She also advised that the new director of ADVS is very supportive of stand downs, however the level of support is determined by the level of support from the host community. Any community wanting to participate in a stand down should contact the Commission for a copy of the step by step procedure manual and advice as desired.

Question: What is a stand down?

Response: Commissioner Fulkerson explained that the typical stand down is a three day event conducted in a central location accessible to the homeless population. It is intended to be a one-stop location for a large variety of social and government services. The site provides a safe place to sleep (tents & cots), hot showers, hot nutritious meals, clean clothes, toiletries, haircuts, VA medical and benefits services as indicated, legal services to potentially clear wants and warrants, employment services (potential employers looking for employees), mental health counseling, and unobtrusive spiritual counseling. Mr. Thornton advised that an organization known as "Soldiers'

Angels” provides a backpack to every stand down attendee that is full of toiletries and necessities such as underwear, socks etc. There are about 275 thousand homeless veterans in the United States and about 1200 in La Paz County.

Question: How does one become a benefits counselor.

Response: Chairman Dingwall provided a multi-faceted response:

- A person is hired by the State, trained and given access to the VA Regional Office.
- People are hired by veterans’ organizations to become National Service Officers.
- The Navajo Nation wanted to select five people to be trained by ADVS. The ADVS Director told the Navajo Nation that he would fund their travel to and from the training site.
- Many veteran organizations provide limited formal training once a year for their veteran service officers.
- The Military Order of the Purple Heart and the American Legion both hold relatively comprehensive annual training for their veteran service officers.
- State Veterans’ Benefits Counselors (VBCs) are required to live in the area where they work.
- VBCs bring a lot of federal money into the State economy.
- Job listings are available on the ADVS website (www.azdvs.gov) and at the Arizona Department of Economic Security Job Service.

Question: How can we get VAMC Prescott to cooperate with the Southern Nevada VA Medical System? Specifically, if a veteran’s primary care provider is in NV, and he lives in Bullhead, why can’t he have his required weekly blood draws done at the Kingman VA Clinic instead of having to drive up to NV just for a blood draw.

Response: Commissioner Fulkerson reinforced that the VA is Federal and the Commission is State. The Commission can not appropriately address questions about Federal services. Vice Chairman Yamanouchi advised that part of the problem may be funding. Commissioner Fulkerson suggested that such problems should be directed to the VA Clinic Director, the Patient Representative or the Director of the Prescott VAMC.

Question: Henderson is 140 miles from Lake Havasu, Prescott is 208 miles and Phoenix is 200 miles. Henderson VA Clinic is much closer, but when meds prescribed by a Henderson provider don’t arrive in time, the Havasu Clinic which is operated by the VAMC in Prescott will not help. Also Prescott delays referrals that have to be made out of state because the needed service is not available in Arizona. They delay writing the necessary consults. The Havasu VA clinic will not draw blood for a patient whose primary care provider is in Southern NV. What can veterans do about this?

Response: Commissioner Fulkerson again advised that the Commission can not address Federal questions, but she advised that she would pass the questions to the VA.

Question: Why are vets eligible for outpatient services in CA and NV and not in AZ? The ID card is Universal, but Arizona won’t honor it. Why?

Response: Lee Borgen advised that CA and NV are in a different VA Medical Region from AZ. Typically the medical facility computers within a particular region are tied together but inter-region computer access becomes more difficult. When people change regions, they must re-register and provide a copy of their DD-214. The new facility then requests VA medical records from the previous facility located in a different region. It is possible to access VA medical records nationwide, but it appears many VA personnel are not trained in how to effectively use their computer system to access other areas.

Question: Several years ago a lot of Indian arts and crafts were donated to the State Veteran Home for the purpose of being displayed for the enjoyment of veterans. It appears that they have been placed in storage. When will they be displayed again? What is going to happen to them? Do we know that everything that was donated is in storage? An independent inventory is required and it needs to be compared with the original inventory that was made when the donation was accepted.

Response: The consensus of the Commissioner's was that they knew nothing about any Native American arts and crafts display at the Home. Lee Borgen advised that there was a large donation of arts and crafts that was donated and displayed throughout the Home. When the home went through a major renovation/remodel everything was taken down and put in storage. The result is that the Native American items remain in climate-controlled storage. Commissioner Fulkerson advised that Commission would get back to the donor. Chairman Dingwall asked what disposition of the artifacts should be if they were not going to be displayed again? The reply was that the donation should be returned.

Question: What is being done to address women veteran issues and needs?

Response: Commissioner Fulkerson noted the following:

- Every VA Medical Center has a Woman Veteran Clinic including counselors.
- Clinics are a little slower to provide specific services; it is a work in progress.
- Every VA Medical Center has a Woman Veteran Coordinator or Liaison.
- VA recently started recognizing and appropriately responding to women veterans suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
- Women are experiencing military sexual trauma (MST) in addition to combat trauma.
- The Resource Council recommended separate treatment facilities for women only, staffed by female providers because some of these women are so traumatized that they are terrorized by the mere proximity of a man, let alone having to deal with one as a provider.

Commissioner Fredericks noted that there are roughly 50 thousand women in the military; about ten percent of the total force. The male veteran population is projected to decrease dramatically over the next 10 years, while the female veteran population is equally dramatically increasing. The State is aware and concerned about its ability to appropriately respond to the population shift. This is another important reason for the Veteran Registry. We are trying to find and get veterans to register so that we know where they are, can identify their needs and subsequently develop strategies to address those needs. Chairman Dingwall observed that in Arizona the veteran population is grossly under-reported. A great many veterans move to Arizona and do not come in contact with any state agency or the VA; therefore they remain "under the radar" and are not part of our tally.

Question: How do vets register?

Response: Commissioner McKim advised that registration can be done on line at www.azdvs.gov.

Question: Vice Chairman Yamanouchi posed a question to Trish Groe in her capacity as Vice Chair of the State Appropriations Committee: Can she provide an update on active duty (ACDU) and retired income tax exemption that is currently \$2,500. He noted that veterans bring billions of dollars into the state economy.

Response: Congresswoman Groe advised that she did not have a ready update on that issue. She observed that people will vote for any bill with the word "veteran" in it. That said, with a current \$800 million dollar deficit, which is projected to be over \$1 billion by January, it is unlikely that an exemption increase will pass. Commissioner Fulkerson observed that the Governor has made it

clear that this is a “no growth” budget year. She told the Resource Council to table their recommendation to increase the ACDU and retired exemption.

Comment: Vice Chairman Yamanouchi noted that too many veterans are not taking advantage of their earned entitlements, particularly education. We need to do a better job of reaching out to returnees and newly discharged personnel to let them know what may be available to them.

Comment: Commissioner Fredericks advised that he is the current Chairman of the Unified Arizona Veterans. He observed that as the economy gets worse, people spend less, business owners lose business, and thus general revenues continue to decline. Veterans must become more proactive; get their issues to the legislators and get veteran issues moved up on the priority lists. It is essential that veterans get to know their legislators and communicate their concerns to the legislators. With the current war situation and the condition of returnees, it is not wise to reduce funding. The Task Force looked at what other states do for veterans, made recommendations and realized some success. Veterans should not be the only ones to take the hits on the budget cuts.

Comment: Vice Chairman Yamanouchi gave a short brief on two programs that can be offered to people:

- Troops to Teachers is a program by the Dept. of Defense and Dept. of Education that supports military personnel transitioning to civilian life. The GI Bill pays for training and certification and gives an additional bonus if the teacher agrees to work in an under-served school district.
- Helmets to Hardhats is a similar program that helps service personnel who want to enter construction trades. This program will soon be available in Arizona.

Chairman Dingwall asked who in the audience had written to a State Senator. Three hands went up. How many know who their state representatives are? Seven hands went up. He noted that senators and representatives are important people to know and communicate with.

Commissioner McKim encouraged everyone to participate in getting veterans to register. When 60 thousand southern Arizona veterans spoke recently, the local Representative listened and is responding.

Chairman Dingwall observed that one of the Governor's mandates (and thus a mandate of Director Maxon) is to actively outreach to rural areas.

Adjournment - The next outreach meeting will be in Sierra Vista at American Legion Post 52 from 10:00am to noon on January 12, 2008. Everyone is invited to attend. Meeting adjourned at 11:30am.

Respectfully submitted,

S. Lee Borgen
Acting recorder